NUNC DIMITTIS

December 27, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:22-35

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation" -Luke 2:29,30 (RSV)

During a one-week period of time last October the stock market went into free fall... Iran launched a Chinese-made missile from Iraqui territory and hit a Kuwaite tanker flying an American flag... Mrs. Reagan checked into Bethesda Naval Hospital for what we thought was a biopsy but which turned out to be radical surgery.

But the event which commanded our attention, virtually mesmerized the whole nation, happened in Midland, Texas. An eighteen-month old child, Jessica McClure, was playing in the back yard, tumbled down a well and was trapped underground for 58 hours. For two and one half days, we could think of little else: We inquired about her the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. "How is she doing? Have they reached her yet?"

Time Magazine gave it prime coverage and tried to explain... "The drama offered the ultimate counterpoint: The dark currents of world events shared the (T.V.) screen with the whimper of a helpless toddler crying out for 'mommy.'" I was in a restaurant in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, savoring a football victory with a son, and when the news came on the television screen the whole place quieted down. Having ignored the news about the rest of the world people crowded in, listening, and were deeply and inexplicably touched by the drama of the rescue effort.

"Her humming verses from a Winnie-the-Pooh song tapped the wellspring of our humanity," Time observed... "In a confusing week, it was the plight of this tiny girl that was most readily comprehensible."

Babies do that kind of thing to us. They command our attention. They claim our hearts. They cause us to do the most unlikely things. They cause otherwise controlled and dignified adults to talk as if they have taken leave of their senses. It is impossible for most of us to ignore them. In the Scottish village where we lived for a while, the Mums would leave the babies in their prams outside the grocery store, on the sidewalk,

unattended. And everyone who walked by, stopped, peered in, sometimes lifted the blanket and said something profound like "cootchie, cootchie" and chucked a chin before moving on.

Why, this dynamic is so powerful, I have actually seen a modern American family stop in its tracks, repeatedly, to watch a video-tape of a six-month old, simply sitting in a high chair eating her morning cereal. Busy homemaker, businessman, medical student, college senior, high school student - sitting around watching reruns of the baby eating. It's amazing!

William Willimon, preacher to the University at Duke, observes that not only do we respond to the fact that babies are absolutely vulnerable and clearly need us, but "somewhere within our deepest selves, we know that we need babies. Some deep human instinct tells us that babies are a sign of our human creativity at its best... One finds it difficult to remain neutral in the face of such smiling mystery." [On A Wild And Windy Mountain, p. 26]

Something like that happens, I think, every time we baptize a child. There are a lot of sound theological reasons for our traditional Presbyterian preference for Infant Baptism. And there are a lot of sound theological reasons for our Presbyterian insistence that baptism is a public event, to be celebrated in the context of public worship. There is also great psychological and emotional wisdom in the event. Something deep within us is touched. Something important is said when babies are held up in our midst. Something potentially very significant is cultivated when we all get in the act. And some deep reservoir of hope is tapped.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples..."

That is what an old man said one day, long ago, when he saw an infant in the Temple and took the infant from his mother's arms and for a moment, cradled him and looked at him. I am fond of this incident. I was fond of it before I had a grandchild, but I am even more fond of it now.

No - mistake 40 days 8 days circumcision vs 21

It was eight days after the birth. Mary and Joseph were in the Temple with their new baby as the law and custom recommended. They were there for the ceremonial cleansing and purifying which the law prescribed for new mothers. They brought their new baby, their first-born, to present him to God, as Jewish parents had been doing for centuries, ever since the Exodus from Egypt, by way of a ritual sacrifice. That is the situation in which Mary and Joseph encountered Simeon, a man we assume was elderly. Luke simply describes him as "devout and waiting for the consolation of Israel."

That moment when Simeon takes the child in his arms is one of the most human moments in the Bible.

When there were new babies in our home, and parents would visit, I was always surprised and pleased and impressed when, without fanfare or explanation, the new grandmother or grandfather would simply take the baby, sit down and cradle him or her, even though it had been 25 years,... just

as gracefully and naturally as eating a meal or reading the paper. There is, I have experienced, something fundamentally good, maybe even holy, when your father or mother holds your child. You have been a channel of something it seems. Your parent is one generation closer to the source. The baby is one generation closer to the goal. But deeper still you know that whenever an adult holds any child that person is somehow powerfully affirmed. Human life is affirmed.

The words Simeon said on the occasion, are surely among the loveliest: **"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."**

The Church knows it as the "Nunc Dimittis," and since sometime in the Fifth Century it has been prayed, every evening, year in and year out, century in and century out, in monasteries and churches, as part of Evening Prayers.

I'm fond of the incident because of its emotional affinity, but it's also theologically important. Simeon was saying quite a bit, after all, when he suggested his nation's salvation rested on this humble child of a peasant carpenter. Certainly no one else was thinking like that. As I watched with dismay, the violence in Gaza among the Palestinian people last week, I mused about how little things change in 2,000 years. The roles are reversed but the situation is the same. Now it is the Palestinian people who are dispossessed, without land, ordinary rights, or any voice in their future. The soldiers now are Israelis. The soldiers were Roman 2,000 years ago and the Jews were denied their sovereignty and their rights. And just as a revolution is clearly brewing among the Palestinian people today, so Bethlehem was volatile; the people of Judea were waiting for the right political leader to emerge to lead the revolt against Rome. In that time, the traditional hope for the Messiah had a distinctly political and military cast to it. The Messiah would surely come and re-establish the throne of David. That meant kicking the Romans out. And the presentation of a peasant child in the Temple was not the most logical place to begin looking.

So, from the outset the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been in sharp contrast with common hopes and expectations. The birth of Jesus didn't fit the prototype Messianic expectations. Jesus, the man certainly didn't measure up to the Messianic criteria accepted by the important people of his day. In fact those people mostly concluded that he was either demented or dangerous, and all agreed that society would be well served by his death.

It is the nature of this birth and it is the nature of this faith to contrast with the hopes and expectations of popular religion. That is an important part of Christianity - for which old Simeon is an eloquent reminder.

The contrast is timeless. When the modern church fails to live by the rules of popular religion, it will be criticized. William Sloane Coffin preached his last sermon at Riverside Church in New York City last Sunday and the New York Times reported on what a vital and lively and often controversial place Riverside became in recent years. It was controversial

because it did not confine its programs to traditional prayer and Bible study - although it has plenty of those. Instead it created programs to feed the hungry. It took steps to reach out to outcasts and to include them. It worked for peace and human rights - and society was surprised. When Christianity is truly and honestly Christian, and when the church is truly and honestly the church, there will be a sharp contrast between the reality of the thing and the expectations the world has for it. Simeon is a reminder of that.

Simeon also saw that nothing was going to be the same again. This infant he held in his arms was going to precipitate conflict. "Set for the rise and fall of many" is the way Simeon put it. As if on cue, Herod reacted immediately, ordering the execution of all the infants in the region. The Magi had to return home by another route. T. S. Eliot has one of them say...

> "We returned to our places, these kingdoms... But no longer at home here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods..."

In the pleasant aftermath of Christmas, Simeon is a sign that the Christianity we espouse will be demanding, perhaps divisive and controversial: that the nature of the enterprise is such that it confronts the status quo in us, as individuals, and the structures of our society in ways that are not always sweetness and light. Simeon saw that the Christ will be an advocate for change, growth in people and in society: and that is never painless or easy... Simeon saw that potential in this baby - perhaps he could see that it would be this Christ, for instance, whose authority would ultimately force a culture to rid itself of built-in racism, a process that was not easy. Simeon saw that this Christ would be present whenever people decide to throw off the chains of oppression and be free. He also saw that it happens within us; that this Christ calls us to change, to be different, to be strong, to be faithful and honest and loving in a world that often laughs at those ideas as irrelevant.

The Spanish mystique Unamuno put that dynamic beautifully...

"May God deny you peace but give you glory."

Simeon, cradling the child and reciting his lovely canticle with its warning - is a reminder that when it comes to saving us and our world, God is not restricted by our expectations, our theology, our churches, our political structures or our conventions, customs,...

Someone wrote recently that what we rational Westerners fear most is that we will be taken in, that we will be seen to be gullible. We are afraid that somehow we will believe too much. So we approach our religion with our guard up, so to speak, not wanting to be taken in by anything we don't thoroughly understand, or which will not be reduced to a scientific equation.

Perhaps that is why God comes at us by way of this infant. Perhaps it is precisely because we can't resist babies and because babies do shake us loose from our self-imposed dignity and babies do cause us to act not

altogether rationally. Perhaps God chose a baby precisely because babies cause us to listen to our hearts at least as intently as we listen to our brains.

In a commentary on this incident, Paul Tillich once wrote,

> "Thy mystery of salvation is the mystery of a child. Only he who can see power under weakness, the whole under a fragment... can say 'Mine eyes have seen thy salvation.'" [The New Being, p. 95]

Old Simeon had something extraordinary going for him. He could see he was an ordinary baby. The angels and shepherds and Wise Men had long since gone back to their respective businesses and on this day what we have is an eight-day old baby and a young mother still a little shaky on her feet and a dutiful father, no doubt concerned to get back to his carpentry. And somehow - in that - Simeon could see God's salvation.

That, it seems to me, is what this incident is about. And it is what the Advent Season and the Christmas celebration are about, long after all the merrymaking, and long after the decorations are put away and life returns to normal. God comes into the life of the world in the most ordinary ways - and asks for our hearts and our lives. God saves us - through ordinary channels: not just catastrophic emotional upheavals of spiritual rebirth; not just in heavenly apparitions and celestial voices, but in ordinary ways.

God loves us and comes to us and gives us newness of life -

in the context of the work we do,
in our labor and laughter,
in our our love and play,
in our relationships and in our struggles.

There is something of that in Truman Capote's lovely story, A Christmas Memory. Perhaps you saw it on television, or better yet, read it again this year.

A little boy, Buddy, is left, for the most part, with an elderly woman relative, who is mildly mentally handicapped and quite child-like. They are good friends. They make fruit cakes every Christmas and exchange gifts and each year they give each other kites.

It's Christmas Day. The fruit cakes have been sent. Modest presents have been exchanged by other family members - and the kites have been given again...

> "'Buddy, the wind is blowing,' and nothing will do till we've run to a pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where a winter hence, Queenie will be buried too). There, plunging through the healthy waist-high grass, we unreel our kites, feel them twitching at the string like sky fish as they swim into the wind. Satisfied, sun-warmed, we sprawl in the

> grass and peel Satsumas and watch our kites cavort. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest.
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> "'My, how foolish I am!' my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. 'You know what I've always thought?' she asks in a tone of discovery, and not smiling at me but a point beyond. 'I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are' - her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone - 'just what they've always been, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes.'"

It was something like that, I imagine, when an old man cradled a new born: "I could leave the world with today in my eyes."

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

God comes into the life of the world and into your life and mine. God uses the ordinariness of life and fills it with holiness. God's kingdom comes into the life of the world through a baby.

We have cradled this child. We have held him in our arms, in our customs and traditions and lovely celebrations and we have been marvelously affirmed.

We have seen the salvation God has provided. And so we, like Simeon, may depart in peace - or - in the meantime - live into the future with great hope,

strength,

expectation,

confidence,

and joy. Amen.

Lord God, we have seen your salvation once again. We have welcomed the child. Now give us courage and faith to live as disciples: to follow your son Jesus, wherever he leads us. Amen.